

6 *China's Influencing Maneuver in South Korea*

Real or Fictional?

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Introduction

A friend of one of the authors, who is a prominent Korean American engineering professor residing in the US, sent an email a few days ago, alarmed that “China is devouring South Korea.” Along with the email, he sent a YouTube clip and online news articles that highlighted China’s covert interventions in the June 2025 presidential election, its massive purchase of land in Jeju Island and elsewhere, and the cultivation of pro-Chinese social and political forces in South Korea. Alleging that China intends to turn South Korea into a vassal state through political and economic subjugation and to dismantle the Republic of Korea (ROK)–US alliance, he urged actions to deter such Chinese moves (Communistrevulsion 2025; Daum Cafe 2024a, 2024b). Those concerns are not confined to Korean Americans but extend to South Koreans, especially conservatives. The warning that “The Chinese are coming! The Chinese are coming!” – a phrase reminiscent of the Cold War concerns during the mid 1960s that “The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming!” – is resurfacing in South Korea.

Pundits in Washington share a similar view. They argue that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been exerting a malign influencing strategy to undermine liberal democracy of the free world by penetrating the political, economic, media, and academic circles, and South Korea is located at the front line (Ham 2025). Dennis Wilder, who served as deputy assistant director in the US Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) Office of East Asia and the Pacific from 2015 to 2016, went further by stating that “China’s goal will be to weaken democracy and to support those favoring better ties with Beijing at the expense of the US alliance.”

He added, “The key to defeating China’s ambition is intense and sustained counterintelligence programs. The United States has a great deal to teach South Korea in this area, and the CIA and the FBI should work with the South Koreans to improve their ability to spot and deter Chinese covert operations” (quoted in Lee 2025). Many conservatives in South Korea, including Yoon Suk-yeol, the impeached former president, believe the Chinese government was deeply involved in the election rigging and the impeachment process. Some even claim that South Korea’s new president, Lee Jae Myung, is pro-China and anti-US.

Are these claims valid? To what extent has China wielded its influence over South Korea? What are the purposes of China’s influencing maneuver in South Korea? What kinds of influencing strategies has it deployed? Has China achieved its objectives through influencing? If so (or not), what factors account for its success or failure? This chapter explores these questions and draws comparative implications from the case study of China’s influencing efforts in South Korea.

China’s Influencing Strategies in South Korea: Context and Objectives

As Robert Dahl (1957: 202) neatly defined, influence in international relations refers to “A’s ability to get B to act in a certain way contrary to B’s original disposition.” Efforts to exercise influence typically arise when there is a mismatch of interests between two states. Influencing strategies are often utilized to alter another state’s behavior by persuading, obligating, and even forcing it to accommodate one’s preferences and wishes. When there is a high degree of complementarity of interests between the two states, exercising influence will be minimal. Thus, national interests become a key factor in accounting for the choice and implementation of influencing strategies. But they are not fixed and vary over time depending on the overall context. Tracing the context surrounding bilateral relations is therefore an essential step in understanding the objectives of influencing strategies.

China–South Korea: Contextual Variations

China and Korea have a long history of extensive interaction, encompassing both conflict and cooperation. The Sui and Tang Dynasties fought for an extended period against the Goguryeo Kingdom during

the Three Kingdoms period of Korea. In 648, however, the Silla Dynasty formed an alliance with the Tang Dynasty and unified the Korean Peninsula by defeating the Goguryeo and Baekje Kingdoms. Since then, China has exercised its influence over the Korean Peninsula in various ways. During the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392), there were cooperation and occasional conflicts between China and Korea. In 1259, the Yuan Dynasty defeated Goryeo and ruled the peninsula for more than 100 years. During the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), Korea entered a tributary relationship with the Ming and later Qing Dynasties. During this period, Korea was seen as a vassal state in the Chinese sphere of influence, but with a significant degree of autonomy (Westad 2021).

Japan's victory over the Qing Dynasty in the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 changed the nature of Joseon–Qing relations. The Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) terminated Chinese control over the Korean Peninsula, and after having won in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Japan annexed Korea by ending the Joseon Dynasty in 1910. Japan's colonial rule continued until 1945. Following the Yalta Conference, held before Japan's defeat in World War II, the Korean Peninsula was divided in 1945, eventually leading to the establishment of the ROK in the south and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north. At the dawn of the Cold War era, Kim Il Sung of North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. Whereas the US was instrumental for dispatching United Nations (UN) forces composed of sixteen nations to defend the ROK, China intervened in the Korean War in October 1950 to support the DPRK. During the Korean War, China dispatched more than 3 million soldiers in total; of these, more than 200,000 were estimated to have died. China was a signatory to the armistice agreement signed on July 27, 1953, along with the DPRK and the US, representing the UN. Chinese intervention and fierce battles with ROK forces made South Koreans regard China as an enemy country. During the Cold War, there were no diplomatic relations between China and the ROK, and the South Korean government imposed a total ban on political, economic, social, and cultural interactions with China.

When the American unipolar moment arrived with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, Beijing–Seoul relations entered a new phase. South Korea normalized diplomatic ties with China in 1992, and the bilateral relations improved rapidly. Within ten years of normalization, China became the leading trading and investment partner for South Korea. More than 20,000 South Korean firms expanded into

China for new business opportunities, and millions of South Koreans visited China annually. Political, economic, social, and cultural ties have grown phenomenally (Lee 2023: 348). China also played a key role in facilitating diplomatic negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program by chairing the Six Party Talks. Occasional disputes over historical and trade issues notwithstanding, ties between Beijing and Seoul remained congenial and stable.

However, since the first Trump administration was inaugurated in January 2017, South Korea has encountered a serious dilemma, which requires muddling through the strategic rivalry between China and the US. The Trump and Biden administrations have pursued a hardball approach to China because China's rise was viewed as a major threat, as popularized by Graham Allison's hypothesis of Thucydides's trap (Allison 2017). The American efforts to encircle China through the Indo-Pacific strategy have become pronounced. The US began to press South Korea to join its strategy to contain China geopolitically, to decouple/delink it geoeconomically, and to isolate it through a coalition of democracies. Meanwhile, China has been trying to resist or mitigate such moves by influencing the ROK to take a more balanced approach in the strategic rivalry (Moon 2021a; Moon and Lee 2022).

Objectives of China's Influencing Strategies in South Korea

According to leading critics of China in South Korea, Beijing's strategic objectives in influencing South Korea are truly audacious and threatening (Choo 2023; Lee 2023). They include the subjugation of the ROK to the Chinese sphere of influence by dismantling the ROK-US alliance, the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea, the deepening of political and economic dependency on China through the co-optation and expansion of pro-China forces, and the rejection of Western influences by integrating the ROK into a China-centered regional order that is essential for implementing Chinese hegemony. However, these interpretations seem somewhat far-fetched. Official Chinese documents and interviews with senior government and party officials and experts offer a different account (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025).

As a neighboring country, China seeks friendly, sincere, mutually beneficial, and tolerant relations with South Korea (Kim and Kim 2025). But this relationship depends on mutual respect of core national interests. Following diplomatic normalization in 1992, Beijing made it

clear that bilateral relations would depend on Seoul's respect for China's core interests involving sovereignty, territory, and noninterference in internal affairs. Central to China's concerns are Seoul's commitment to the "One China" policy regarding Taiwan, respect for China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, and noninterference in China's domestic affairs such as Beijing's policies toward Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. China's foreign policy and influencing strategies aim to protect these core interests.

China's geopolitical objectives are closely related to the ROK–US alliance. A senior Chinese foreign ministry official expressed his concern to one of the authors in the following way: "South Korea's decision to form and maintain the alliance with the US is solely its sovereign matter, and China cannot complain about it. But we hope the ROK would pursue a more balanced approach by harmonizing the US alliance with its strategic cooperative partnership with China. If the ROK–US alliance shows a hostile posture against China, China cannot help but take reciprocal measures against South Korea" (Interview 2021).

Geo-economic objectives constitute another component. The US government has pursued decoupling/de-risking strategies aimed at reducing China's integration in global supply chains. For Washington policymakers, such measures are intended to help the US prevail over China in the rivalry by slowing down the latter's economic growth. Such a strategy cannot be executed by the US alone. It requires close cooperation with its allies and partners, and Washington has been urging Seoul to reshore, near-shore, and friend-shore to divert its trade and investment away from China. The US has also been restricting Seoul's transfer of critical technologies and the pertinent parts and components to Beijing (Moon and Yeon 2024). Facing such developments, China has been employing various influencing strategies to preserve the existing trade and investment flow from Seoul and to prevent South Korea from joining an anti-China economic bloc, while fostering trilateral cooperation (e.g., China–Japan–ROK Free Trade Agreement) and inducing South Korea's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative.

Equally important is the promotion of China's international image through public diplomacy. China is the second largest economic power in the world, but its soft power and public image have lagged far behind the US. The Chinese government has been trying to reverse this trend by not only introducing Chinese culture and society, but also showcasing

Chinese ways of democracy and development. South Korea was no exception to these Chinese efforts. The Chinese government has been trying to enhance its public image by introducing Chinese culture to the grassroots and cultivating dense social and political networks with elites and opinion leaders in South Korea.

Elucidating the Nature of Chinese Influencing in South Korea: Direct and Indirect Strategies

What kind of influencing strategy has China employed to advance its objectives in South Korea? As Steve Chan points out in the introduction to this volume, influencing is all about taking control over outcomes by combining available resources with the command of policy capacity in a specific context. Controlling the outcome can be done in two distinct ways. One is direct influencing, and the other indirect influencing (Moon 1988).

Direct influencing can be defined as a government's efforts to alter the behavior of other countries to accommodate or comply with its national interests by utilizing its resources and policy capacity. It usually takes the form of sticks and carrots or a mixture of both. A country can resort to the use of threats, coercive measures, sanctions, and even blackmail. It can also interfere with others' domestic political processes through covert actions. Conversely, carrots involving a variety of positive incentives such as inducements of rewards and side payments can also be utilized to secure the cooperative and compliant behavior of the targeted country. Direct influencing strategies usually involve government actors (Hanson et al. 2020).

Indirect influencing refers to government's efforts to exert influence over the targeted country through circumventive methods. Its targets are not government agencies and officials, but social or economic elites, opinion leaders, nongovernmental actors, and even grassroots citizens. An indirect influencing strategy attempts to cultivate friendly social and political networks, shape favorable public opinions, and, if necessary, mobilize them to engage in a proxy war with antagonistic forces. It can take diverse forms such as co-optation with grassroots organizations through social and cultural outreach, cultivation of favorable social and political forces through functional networking, manipulation of mass opinion through public diplomacy or cognitive warfare, and ethnic mobilization (Hamilton and Joske 2018).

Direct Influencing Strategy

China has been relying on diplomatic procedures to resolve disputes with South Korea. However, when diplomatic routines fail to alter Seoul's policy behavior that triggers an acute sense of crisis in Beijing, China has resorted to direct influencing strategies. These efforts have involved a mixture of retaliation, coercion, sanctions, and sometimes also positive incentives (that is, the use of carrots). China has also been accused of engaging in covert action and propaganda to influence South Korea's domestic politics.

Resort to retaliation is a classic example of direct influencing. Since diplomatic normalization in 1992, relations between Beijing and Seoul have been smooth. But a trade dispute in 2000 upended the bilateral ties. In June 2000, the ROK government suddenly announced a measure to increase import tariffs on frozen and marinated garlic of Chinese origin by ten times from 30 percent to 315 percent. The safeguard clause was invoked to protect the interests of South Korea's garlic farmers. The total value of garlic imports from China was then a meager \$15 million.

Chinese retaliation was quick and almost merciless. Beijing banned the import of South Korea's mobile phones and polyethylene. This ban caused enormous pain to South Korean exporters, amounting to a loss of \$500 million worth of business with China. The Kim Dae-jung government made a compromise with the Chinese government by withdrawing Seoul's initial measure, agreeing to import 32,000 to 35,000 tons of garlic from China at a 30–50 percent tariff rate annually for three years from 2000 to 2002. It was an outright victory for China and a humiliating defeat for South Korea (Chung 2011: 264).

China has also deployed coercion and sanctions to exert direct influence over South Korea on other occasions, as exemplified by the dispute over the US deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense (THAAD) in South Korea during 2016–2017. In 2016, the US Forces in South Korea (USFK) proposed the deployment of one battery of THAAD in South Korea, supposedly aimed at intercepting North Korea's short-, medium-, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. The battery was composed of six launchers and one X-band radar. The Chinese government expressed its concerns through diplomatic channels that this deployment could undermine its nuclear deterrence, especially its second-strike capability in its northeast region. The

X-band radar, with a detection range of 2,000 kilometers, can easily monitor its missile activities there. The Park Geun-hye government was initially hesitant to allow the THAAD deployment. Defense Minister Han Min-koo of the ROK stated on February 11, 2015, that Seoul did not have any plan to allow the deployment of THAAD. The Office of the President even announced that “there had been no request, and hence no consultation and no decision.” But five months later, the Park government reversed its decision, enraging the Chinese government (Yonhap News 2015).

Despite China's strong opposition, on July 8, 2016, the ROK government officially announced its decision to allow the deployment of the United States' THAAD in Seongju County. It assured China that THAAD would be focused solely on North Korea's nuclear and missile threats and would not be directed toward any third-party states, including China. Nevertheless, China's reactions were immediate and fierce. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made strong remarks: “The deployment of THAAD is beyond [the] defense needs of the Korean Peninsula, and no excuse can be justifiable.” He also criticized Washington, stating that “The US should neither promote its own security by taking advantage of other countries' instability, nor threaten other countries' legitimate security interests by making an excuse of their own security threat” (Liu and Mo 2016).

Chinese reactions went beyond rhetoric. Beijing suspended all governmental and nongovernmental exchange and cooperation with South Korea. Worse was yet to come. The Chinese government took a wide range of punitive measures. They included the imposition of nontariff barriers (customs and quarantine), a ban on Chinese tour groups to South Korea, and a boycott of South Korean products and South Korean firms operating in China. The Chinese government also subjected South Korean firms operating in China to stringent regulation (e.g., the Lotte shopping mall). It moreover adopted a ban on entertainment with South Korean content (限韓令) by targeting Korean pop culture, and ordered the withdrawal of selected Chinese financial firms operating in South Korea. Some of these measures were initiated by the Chinese government, while others were undertaken voluntarily by Chinese citizens as a protest against Seoul's decision to permit the deployment of the THAAD system (Chung 2017). The consequent economic costs were devastating to South Korea. Its exports to China were cut by ₩1.4 trillion. The tourism sector alone lost ₩7.1 trillion.

Exports of cultural contents to China decreased by ₩8.72 billion. Altogether, the THAAD dispute incurred a loss of more than ₩8.5 trillion to South Korea (Moon and Boo 2017).

The Moon Jae-in government resolved the dispute by addressing China's concerns in October 2017. The Chinese government raised three issues: no additional deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea, no participation in the US-led theater missile defense system (TMD), and no trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan. The Moon government accommodated those "Three Nos" through a series of back-channel negotiations. There were no formal agreements, but envoys from the Moon government verbally assured their Chinese counterparts that (1) the Moon government did not have any intention to allow the additional deployment of THAAD because of domestic opposition, (2) it did not have any plan to join the TMD because it was developing its own missile defense system, and (3) South Korea did not have any intention to join the trilateral military alliance that would help Japan rearm itself through the amendment of its constitution (Moon 2021b). Although such informal mutual understanding mitigated further worsening of bilateral relations, the aftermath of Chinese sanctions and punitive actions left a formidable legacy.

Sticks are not China's only tool for influencing South Korea. Beijing also often employs carrots. Both the THAAD dispute and the COVID-19 shock critically damaged China's public image in South Korea. This was particularly the case because the Chinese government took draconian measures to restrict South Koreans' visits to China during the COVID-19 period. As the COVID-19 situation stabilized, the Chinese government granted visa-free entry to holders of South Korean passports for thirty days for the purpose of business, tourism, and visits. Though a temporary measure from September 30, 2024, to December 31, 2025, the measure boosted China's image in South Korea.

Chinese efforts to exert influence in South Korean politics through propaganda (so-called cognitive warfare) and alleged covert actions were the most controversial. Cognitive warfare is "a form of warfare that focuses on influencing the opponent's reasoning, decisions, and ultimately, actions to secure strategic objectives without fighting or with less military effort that would otherwise be required" (Bugayova and Stepanenko 2025: 1). However, China's approach exhibits some

distinctive characteristics rooted in its strategic doctrines of “Unrestricted Warfare” (超限戰) and “Three Warfares” (三戰). The former was first articulated by People’s Liberation Army (PLA) colonels Liang and Wang (1999), while the latter was first formally codified in the “Political Work Regulations of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army” promulgated by the Central Military Commission of the CCP in 2003.

Unlike normal statecraft or conventional influence operations that maintain clear boundaries between different policy tools, Chinese cognitive warfare deliberately integrates military, economic, and diplomatic instruments in pursuit of comprehensive national power. The “Three Warfares” doctrine – psychological warfare, media warfare, and legal warfare – creates a coordinated framework that combines information manipulation with legal justifications to achieve what Chinese strategists call “winning without fighting” (不戰而屈人之兵). What makes this approach particularly distinctive is its long-term strategic orientation and systematic mobilization of both state and ostensibly private actors within a comprehensive influence ecosystem (Lee 2023: 237). Critics of China in South Korea have accused the Chinese government of conducting such subtle cognitive warfare. They have cited three cases as evidence to support their allegations of such maneuvers.

The first is known as the “China-gate” conspiracy. In 2020, it was widely circulated in cyberspace that some Korean Chinese residing in South Korea, who were controlled by the CCP, were supporting the pro-China Democratic Party of Korea in elections by operating secret cyber platforms and spreading fake news. This was later proven false, but the controversy left strong negative impressions of China (Choi 2020; Kim 2023).

The second case was publicized in a report by the National Cyber Security Center (NCSC) of the National Intelligence Service (NIS). On November 13, 2023, the NIS released a report to the public, warning about Chinese penetration of South Korea’s cyberspace. According to this report, several unknown Chinese public relations entities created thirty-eight websites disguised as internet media organizations in South Korea’s cyberspace and began to spread misleading news content (NCSC 2023). They used such domain names as Haimai and Haixun, pretending to be South Korean media entities. The news content that they dispersed included “The ROK’s participation in the Democracy

Summit, ‘the losses outweigh the gains,’” and “The Chinese government is successful in handling the COVID-19.” Their news content mostly involved anti-America and pro-China messages. It was the first case in which Chinese entities were utilized to directly manipulate public opinion in South Korea by spreading fake news and China-favorable news. The cybersecurity wing of the NIS blocked such activities at the initial phase of their operations (Hong 2023).

The third case started with Microsoft’s internal report on the danger of the Chinese government’s interference with local elections. On April 5, 2024, the report warned that voters in South Korea, the US, and India were likely to face Chinese cyberattacks associated with national elections. South Korea was then scheduled to have a general election on April 10. As the report was published five days before the general election, South Korean netizens began to speculate that China would be engaging in a massive campaign to spread AI-assisted deep-fake content through social networking services to support pro-China candidates, mostly from the Democratic Party of Korea, then the opposition party. This speculation, however, turned out to be false (Yoo 2024). It is worth noting that election interference is not unique to China. As Dov Levin (2020) documents in *Meddling in the Ballot Box*, the US has a long history of engaging in similar practices, beginning with the CIA’s effort to prevent the Italian Communist Party from winning in 1947.

The most serious accusation came from those who argued that the Chinese government was directly involved in the manipulation of South Korea’s national election management through covert political actions (Geum 2025). Former President Yoon Suk-yeol declared emergency martial law on December 3, 2024, which did not last more than two hours as the National Assembly instantly lifted it. Yoon cited the irregularities of the national election management system as one of the reasons that led him to declare martial law. In his address to the nation on December 12, he even lamented that South Korea had become defenseless against Chinese spy activities.

On January 16, 2025, SkyDaily, a conservative internet media group, reported the shocking news that at the time of declaring martial law on December 3, 2024, ninety-nine alleged Chinese spies (hackers) who were reportedly at the training facility of the National Election Commission (NEC), were arrested by US military personnel and transferred to a US military base in Okinawa for interrogation and that they

all confessed to their involvement in election fraud (Heo 2025). The news spread quickly through conservative cyberspace, complicating the impeachment process. But the USFK officially announced that the news was fake and that there was no such incident. The NEC also clarified that at the time of the martial law declaration, ninety-six officials of the NEC, who were getting regular professional training, were staying at its dormitory and that no Chinese were present at all. The NEC instantly turned SkyDaily and its reporter over to the police, and the accused were later indicted by the Office of Prosecutors (Bang 2025).

Indirect Influencing Strategy

China has also engaged in a variety of indirect influencing strategies to affect the policy process, to promote outcomes favorable to China, and to enhance China's image through public diplomacy at the grassroots level through the cultivation of dense pro-China social networks and ethnic Chinese mobilization.

The establishment and operation of the Confucius Institute (CI) throughout South Korea is well known. The CI, which is managed by the Confucius Institute Foundation under the Chinese Ministry of Education, aims at promoting the education of the Chinese language, enriching Chinese cultural experiences, providing scholarships for Chinese studies, and enhancing academic exchange and cooperation (Ahn 2020). It can be seen as an outreach wing of Beijing's public diplomacy.

The first CI in South Korea was established in 2004, one of its first overseas operations. South Koreans' selective affinity with the Confucian tradition, coupled with the Chinese economic boom, popularized it. At present, there are twenty-three CIs, one in Seoul and twenty-two in provincial cities, mostly at leading local universities. They serve as hubs that support other activities related to the promotion of the CI's objectives. For example, 132 elementary, middle, and high schools, twelve nongovernmental organizations, and one provincial office of education are currently operating Confucius classes that offer courses on Chinese language and culture. Each CI gets an annual grant of ₩100 million (about \$73,000) for its operations. Chinese language teachers are also dispatched to South Korea. As the oldest and largest such operation in Asia, the CIs have provided South

Koreans with easy access to Chinese language training and education in Chinese culture and traditions. They have also promoted academic exchanges and cooperation with China, serving as a useful tool for Chinese public diplomacy.

Such state-sponsored cultural and educational programs are not unique to China: Many countries operate comparable programs. For example, Germany's Goethe-Institute, France's Alliance Française, the United Kingdom's British Council, and international broadcasters such as Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Company also play roles in projecting national narratives abroad. As with these institutes, CIs are also funded by and administratively linked to Chinese authorities. But several host countries have specifically raised the question of the CIs' governance, transparency, and the boundary between cultural diplomacy and political influence.

Another indirect influencing strategy involves the cultivation of dense social networks in South Korea. Several existing studies on China's influencing strategy in the US, Australia, and Europe show that the Chinese government has been very active in co-opting and utilizing politicians, government officials, journalists, scholars, and other opinion leaders by providing them with material and nonmaterial incentives (Drinhausen et al. 2023). Some critics in South Korea have also claimed that the Chinese government has been targeting the political elite and opinion leaders through bribery, "red aristocrat" (紅色貴族) syndrome, and provision of material incentives (Choo 2024; Song 2023). But our investigation could not find any known evidence to substantiate such claims. The term "red aristocrat" refers to individuals – often scholars or public figures – who are favored by the Chinese government for their pro-China positions. In exchange for promoting pro-Beijing narratives, they may receive modest benefits such as financial support, multi-entry visas, or preferential treatment for their families.

The most visible channel for social networking is the existing non-governmental bilateral friendship associations. The Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (中國人民外交學會) has been maintaining close contacts with the 21C Korea–China Leaders Society (21C-KCLS) led by former politician Han-kyu Kim. It was founded on the occasion of Premier Zhu Rongji's visit to South Korea in 2000 (<https://21c-kcls.com>). The 21C-KCLS has organized a variety of bilateral leaders' fora such as the China–ROK Leaders Forum, the China–Korea Woman

Leaders' Forum, the China–Korea Defense Security Forum, the China–Korea Journalist Forum, and the China–Korea Next Generation Leaders' Forum. These fora have served as an important vehicle for the promotion of mutual understanding and exchange and cooperation.

The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and the China Association for International Friendly Contact, unofficial diplomatic channels of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have cultivated close ties with the Korea–China Friendship Association (KCFA), which has been registered at the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 1982 (www.korea-china.org). Both Chinese organizations are well known for influencing and public diplomacy activities. The KCFA membership is composed of mostly Korean scholars and experts on China and former foreign service officers. Apart from these organizations, the CCP, the Chinese government agencies, and the PLA have cooperative ties with numerous functional nongovernmental organizations in the areas of economy, security, culture, and science and technology. These contacts are primarily for the promotion of mutual understanding and friendship, but the Chinese side has allegedly utilized them in influencing the ROK government's policymaking as well as enhancing China's public image in South Korea. Ironically, these South Korean organizations have been subsidized by the ROK government rather than by the Chinese government. In fact, the ROK government was deeply involved in creating them as nongovernmental channels of communication with China. They can thus also be seen as conduits for South Korea to influence China.

The Department of Press, Communication and Public Diplomacy (新闻司) at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has been inviting Asian journalists to visit China on a regular basis. During 2002–2017, the department held eighty-two events in Beijing, and many Japanese and South Korean journalists (41 percent) attended them. Moreover, Chinese state-owned mass media organizations have entered into agreements of cooperation with several South Korean media entities. It is difficult to say that such invitations and exchanges and cooperation constitute an “influencing” maneuver since they are reciprocal and practiced by many countries. But they can be seen as an integral part of China's influencing or public diplomacy. In the past, various agencies of the Chinese government and the CCP were active in

inviting political leaders, opinion leaders, and scholars, but such invitations have slowed down since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chinese governmental and nongovernmental think tanks have also been instrumental for indirect influencing activities. The China Institute of International Affairs under the MOFA, the Chinese Institute for Contemporary International Relations under the Ministry of State Security, the Chinese People's Association for Peace and Disarmament under the International Department of the CCP, the Academy of Military Science of the PLA, and the Institute of Asia-Pacific and Global Strategy of the Chinese Academy of Social Science have established extensive contacts with corresponding government and private think tanks and universities in South Korea. They usually enter relationships with their counterparts and promote exchange and cooperation. In many cases, it is South Korean think tanks rather than Chinese ones that initiate and promote mutual exchanges. But whenever disputes arise between China and the ROK, these institutions are mobilized to collect intelligence and to influence the ROK government through information sharing with their counterparts. Some nongovernmental organizations such as the Charhar Institute for Public Diplomacy, Grandview Institute, and Taihe Institute have also actively engaged in public diplomacy. Of these, the Charhar Institute, whose founder is Han Fang-ming, a former vice president of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, has been controversial because of its assertive public diplomacy activities (Kim 2024).

China has been very effective in taking advantage of ethnic Chinese populations in some Western countries such as the US, Australia, and the United Kingdom under the united front strategy (Chinese Communist Party Central Committee 2021). But the number of ethnic Chinese in South Korea is relatively small, and their political and economic influence is rather limited. After the Chinese civil war in 1949, sizable numbers of Chinese refugees, almost 100,000 people, from Shandong Province fled to South Korea. But as President Park Chung-hee's nationalist policy limiting foreign ownership of properties in the 1970s forced ethnic Chinese either to relocate to Taiwan or to migrate to the US and Canada, this population dropped sharply, and is currently estimated to be about 20,000.

This small population is further divided between pro-mainland and pro-Taiwan factions. The Chinese government maintains cooperative working relations with the Federation of the Promotion of Peaceful

Reunification of China and the Association of Ethnic Chinese (華僑) in Korea. In addition, there are about 700,000 Korean Chinese (朝鮮族) and 150,000 Chinese students, migrant workers, and housewives. Some critics of China in South Korea claim that “Chinese nationals residing in the South Korean territory are 100% latent spies” (In 2025). But this claim seems groundless, and influencing strategy through ethnic mobilization has been very limited. Chinese of Korean ethnic origin can exercise voting rights only in local elections three years after obtaining a residential permit. But they are not allowed to vote in presidential and general elections, and thus they cannot exert direct influence on South Korea's domestic politics.

Have China's Influencing Maneuvers Been Effective in South Korea? A Performance Evaluation

China's influencing strategy has at least four major objectives in the South Korean context. They are the promotion and protection of Chinese core interests, the preservation of geopolitical interests, the maximization of geo-economic benefits, and the enhancement of China's public image by shaping favorable public opinion. Has China been successful in achieving these objectives? To what extent have direct and indirect influencing strategies been useful?

China's core interests are the “One China” policy, Beijing's sovereign claim over Taiwan and the South China Sea, and the principle of noninterference in China's domestic political affairs, including Tibet and Xinjiang (Park and Lee 2025). On the Taiwan issue, the Chinese influencing strategy has usually worked. Since diplomatic normalization in 1992, the ROK has honored the “One China” policy by severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan (the Republic of China) regardless of liberal and conservative governments. The ROK has taken a very cautious stance on the issue of the South China Sea by appealing to a peaceful and diplomatic resolution. As for Tibet and Xinjiang, Seoul has avoided making any political statements that can provoke China. The Chinese government has used formal diplomatic channels as well as direct and indirect influencing strategies in appealing to the inviolability of its core interests, and the South Korean government has by and large honored them. There were no salient disputes between the two countries regarding China's core interests.

However, the Yoon Suk-yeol government (2022–2025) took a different approach. Taking sides with the US, the Yoon government expressed concerns over China's attempt to change the status quo over the Taiwan Strait. Yoon explicitly stated that the ROK cannot make military intervention in the case of the Taiwan crisis due to its fear of North Korea's military invasion, but he was implicitly critical of China's assertive behavior over Taiwan. As for the South China Sea, Yoon echoed a position similar to that of the US and Japan, stating his opposition to any change to the status quo by force and urging China to comply with international law and order. The Yoon government also championed "value diplomacy" in concert with the US by hosting a democracy summit in Seoul and advocating the coalition of democracies that treats China as one of the leading adversaries (Park 2023). Nevertheless, the Yoon government fell short of issuing any overt statement critical of China over those issues.

During the pro-US Yoon presidency, there was some compromise of Chinese core interests in terms of rhetoric, but it did not cross the red line (e.g., an explicit support of the Taiwan government and/or participation in US-led military maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait) that Beijing has set. Nevertheless, China's core interests were no longer considered sacrosanct during the Yoon government, implying that there are limits to China's direct and indirect influencing strategies.

How about geopolitical issues? Have China's direct and indirect influencing strategies altered the ROK government's policy on China and the US? In the case of THAAD, Chinese pressures and persuasion worked, since the Moon government addressed China's concerns by agreeing with Beijing's "Three Nos" stance (Kim 2022). But the acceptance of the "Three Nos" did not reflect a policy change as a result of pressure from Beijing. It was the continuation of liberal policy since the Kim Dae-jung government, and there was a complementarity of interests between Beijing and Seoul. Nevertheless, China's coercive tactics and sanctions brought about a profound impact on public opinion. At the initial phase of the THAAD dispute, the number of those who supported its deployment was larger than those who opposed it. But as China's sanctions began to threaten the South Korean economy, including the life of ordinary people who relied on their income from Chinese tourists, opinion polls opposing the deployment of THAAD outpaced those supporting it (Moon 2017; Moon and Boo 2017).

Another Chinese foreign policy objective has been to weaken the ROK–US alliance ties while fostering a pro-China stance (Klingner 2024). Such efforts have produced a mixed result. As South Korea's economic dependence on China has grown, pundits have been advocating the policy of “security with the US, economy with China” (安美經中). Since the Kim Dae-jung government, the leaders of South Korea, regardless of ideological line, have worked hard to harmonize the ROK–US alliance with strategic cooperative partnership with China. President Kim was the first leader who emphasized the necessity of muddling through negative complications stemming from the China–US strategic rivalry. Roh Moo-hyun and Moon Jae-in, progressive leaders who succeeded him, followed Kim's lead by adopting a relatively balanced diplomacy between China and the US. Even President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of Park Chung-hee and a staunch conservative leader, attended the Beijing Victory Day Parade on September 3, 2015, as part of her balanced diplomacy – a move that alarmed the US. Like other South Korean leaders, she sought to improve relations with China while strengthening the alliance with the US. They were walking on a tightrope between Beijing and Washington. Their strategic calculation, coupled with China's influencing strategies, helped them pursue a balanced diplomacy (Moon 2017). In theory, the US–China rivalry has not been uniformly negative for Seoul: Competition between Beijing and Washington has often created diplomatic space that Korean governments could exploit. In practice, however, structural constraints stemming from its alliance with Washington have prevented Seoul from extracting concessions, diversifying partnerships, and pursuing hedging strategies.

Defying the tradition of balanced diplomacy, Yoon Suk-yeol took a pro-US stance. Emphasis on the ROK–US alliance led to accepting a trade-off with the cooperative partnership with China. He elevated ROK–US relations to a comprehensive strategic alliance that encompassed cooperation on multiple military, economic, technological, and intelligence front. Yoon also upgraded Japan–ROK–US trilateral military cooperation by adopting a Camp David joint statement with President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan on August 18, 2023. Although his bid to join the Quadrilateral Security Dialog was thwarted by Japan's opposition, the Yoon government actively participated in the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, his government intensified strategic

and logistic cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) by attending the NATO plus the Indo-Pacific Four (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea) summits. Seoul emerged as the lynchpin of the Indo-Pacific architecture. China tried to slow down Yoon's pro-American policies through formal diplomatic channels and informal networks in vain, revealing the limits of its influencing strategies. Contrary to Western observers' worrisome prediction (Howell 2025), China's influencing was not effectual.

China's influencing efforts in the geo-economic domain have also produced mixed outcomes. As in the case of the garlic dispute, China's intense retaliation succeeded in altering South Korea's policy. Beijing was also successful in changing Seoul's behavior through an indirect influencing strategy. In 2014, the Chinese government proposed the establishment of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a financing institution for its Belt and Road Initiative. China tried to persuade South Korea to be one of its founding members. Even though President Xi Jinping made his personal appeal during his visit to Seoul in July 2014, President Park Geun-hye was evasive primarily because of the US opposition. On March 26, 2015, however, South Korea officially announced its decision to join the AIIB as a founding member. Two factors played a critical role in altering President Park's decision in favor of joining the AIIB.

The first factor was the business community, led by the Association of Korean Overseas Construction Industry. Representatives from the construction and engineering industry claimed that demands for infrastructure in Asia were on the rise, but South Korean firms could not seize opportunities because of a lack of financing. This was particularly the case because project financing from the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank is far short of the region's demands. In this regard, the AIIB is essential. They urged the ROK government to join the AIIB and secure an appropriate share of the new bank (ChosunBiz 2015). For them, the bank's launch was expected to provide ample business opportunities for Korean construction and engineering firms armed with a global competitive edge (Choi 2015).

The second factor was the mass media. Except for a few minor conservative newspapers such as *Hankyung* and *Munhwa Ilbo*, most of the mass media, regardless of their pro-US or pro-China orientation, pressed the Seoul government to join the AIIB. Chinese government delegates and nongovernmental organizations were very

successful in initiating a sort of proxy war in South Korea by persuading the business sector and media entities about the value of AIIB through back-channel diplomacy (Moon and Boo 2017). Thus China's direct and indirect influencing strategies made a big difference.

However, as for the issue of decoupling and de-risking, which is more critical to China's national interests, its direct and indirect influencing strategies have not yielded any discernable outcomes. Its various influencing efforts notwithstanding, China could not prevent South Korea from friend-shoring to the US. Just before the active pursuit of a decoupling strategy by the first Trump administration in 2018, South Korea's exports to China were \$162 billion, accounting for 26.8 percent of its total exports, whereas its exports to the US were \$72.7 billion, only 12 percent of its total exports. Since 2022, however, the trend has shifted significantly. Seoul's exports to China dropped to \$155.7 billion (22.8 percent) in 2022 and \$133 billion (19.5 percent) in 2024. Meanwhile, exports to the US rose to \$109.7 billion (16.1 percent) in 2022 and \$127.7 billion (18.7 percent) in 2024 (Korean Statistical Information Service 2025).

A similar trend can be found in the pattern of South Korea's outward direct investment that is an integral part of its supply chain. In 2013, South Korea's direct investment in China was \$5.2 billion, nearly matching its direct investment in the US (\$5.86 billion). But after the first Trump administration announced its decoupling policy in 2017, the gap between the two began to widen. Seoul's direct investment in the US reached \$29.8 billion in 2022 and \$22.2 billion in 2024, whereas its direct investment in China declined to \$8.5 billion in 2022 and a record low of \$1.9 billion in 2024. The increasingly competitive nature of Chinese markets, overall strengthened government regulation, and a sharp decline in investment in the semiconductor sector contributed to shaping a reverse trend (Export-Import Bank of Korea 2025).

The trend is further evidenced by changes in the number of South Korean firms operating in the two countries. In 2011, 857 South Korean firms entered Chinese markets, whereas 469 firms entered the US markets. Beginning in 2017, the trend was reversed. The US became the top destination for South Korean firms, replacing China, with 553 firms getting into the US market compared to 538 firms entering the Chinese market. In 2024, the US share (687 firms) was more than twice

as large as the China share (275 firms) (Export-Import Bank of Korea 2025).

Exports of technology revealed a similar trend. South Korea exported technology worth \$3.1 billion to China in 2018, but the figure dropped to \$2.6 billion in 2022 and \$2.7 billion in 2024. Meanwhile, Seoul's technology exports to the US grew from \$2.1 billion in 2018 to \$4.4 billion in 2022 and \$5.1 billion in 2023 (Ministry of Science and IT of the Republic of Korea 2024). Data on exports, investment, and technology exports demonstrate an inverse relationship between China and the US, implying that Washington's decoupling/de-risking policy has been working well with South Korea, and that China has failed to deter such development through direct and/or indirect influencing strategies.

To what extent have China's influencing strategies contributed to improving public opinion in South Korea? Data reveal that they have not been effective either. According to a national survey by the Korean Broadcasting System in 2022, 81 percent of respondents expressed the view that China is the most unfavorable country among the fifty-six countries included in the survey (KBS World 2022). Another survey shows that 38.8 percent of respondents perceived China as a potential threat (29.5 percent) or an adversary (2.2 percent) in 2014. But the figures worsened in 2024, when 58.7 percent perceived China as a potential threat and 7.6 percent saw China as an adversary. In contrast, only 10.3 percent regarded China as a partner and 23.4 percent viewed China as a competitor (IPUS 2011–2023). This is a sharp drop from 2015, when 33.9 percent perceived China as a partner and 39.9 percent saw China as a competitor. Anti-China perception was widespread, especially among Korean youths in their twenties and thirties. Seventy-six point six percent of Korean youths favored the US, whereas only 2.9 percent showed a favorable attitude toward China, which is lower than Japan (15.1 percent) and North Korea (4.9 percent) (IPUS 2011–2023).

A 2023 survey by the East Asia Institute presents another interesting finding. The survey asked its respondents, "Which side should South Korea take in the case of China–US military conflict?" In 2017, even during the THAAD crisis, 30.5 percent of 1,008 respondents said that South Korea should take sides with the US, whereas the figure for China was only 2.5 percent. Sixty-seven percent supported a neutral stance. But a survey conducted in 2023 showed a different result. Those who

supported the neutral stance declined to 50.3 percent, while those who supported taking sides with the US increased to 45.2 percent. Respondents supporting China were only 4.5 percent. Additionally, 52.62 percent answered that China–ROK relations are bad or very bad (EAI 2023).

These findings indicate that China's influencing efforts, both direct and indirect, have had very limited and even negative effects in enhancing its public image. Their extensive networks notwithstanding, the CIs have not been effective in mobilizing grassroots support (Lee 2021; Song 2023). Functional and social networking through exchanges and cooperation have not produced the expected outcomes either. It is very rare to find any news reports and op-ed articles favorable to China and its policy lines. Unlike in other countries, Chinese ethnic mobilization in South Korea has not been operational at all. Most Korean Chinese in South Korea are struggling with daily earnings, and public appeals or political actions by Chinese students residing in South Korea have often backfired.

What Went Wrong? Accounting for Failure

China's influencing maneuver in South Korea has not been successful. What went wrong? Several factors explain this phenomenon: ideological polarization and strong domestic political resistance, the rise of anti-China civic movements, a hostile media environment, an anti-China transnational coalition, and the repercussions of China's coercive diplomacy.

Cold War Legacies and Domestic Political Resistance

The Cold War was over more than thirty years ago, but its legacies remain alive and well. Conservative politicians in South Korea demonize China. For them, China is an ally of arch-foe North Korea. Taking sides with China is tantamount to cooperating with the enemy. China is a communist country, and its aim is to place South Korea under its sphere of influence and turn it into its vassal with communist ideology. Finally, communist China and its hegemonic ascension is a threat to peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia. Thus pro-China is equated with pro-North Korea and anti-US. Their Cold

War narratives have commanded a strong public appeal, which has been used as a tool for attacking progressive political leaders.

For example, the Moon Jae-in government mitigated the THAAD issue through the “Three Nos” formula, which was not any formal diplomatic agreement, but an informal explanation to questions raised by the Chinese foreign ministry. But conservatives branded it as a “humiliating compromise hampering sovereignty” that jeopardized national security. As another example, Lee Jae Myung, the presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, said about China during his campaign: “I said we should say ‘xie xie’ both to Taiwan and to China. What’s so wrong about that?” “We don’t need to get deeply involved in the dispute between Taiwan and China. We should respect the status quo and keep our distance.” These remarks have gotten Lee in trouble. Members of the conservative People Power Party (PPP) described the remarks as “obsequious” and a classic example of “a foreign policy of pro-Chinese toadyism.” The PPP’s presidential candidate, Kim Moon-soo, took direct aim at Lee: “The Chinese Communist Party is the enemy that invaded our country in the Korean War, and the US is the country that helped us. How could the US and China be on the same level?” (Moon 2025).

Progressive political leaders who make favorable statements about China or interact with their Chinese counterparts and diplomats are often branded as pro-China and anti-US. figures. Under the circumstances, it becomes extremely risky for them to be implicated in China’s influencing maneuver. This hostile political and ideological landscape poses a major hindrance to China’s direct and indirect influencing efforts in South Korea.

The Rise of Anti-China Civic Groups

The THAAD dispute in 2016 precipitated a proliferation of anti-China civic groups in South Korea. They have become more vocal and well organized during the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol government. Their call for the government’s tight monitoring of Chinese illicit political and cyber operations as well as tough measures to handle them has been drawing broad public support.

The most noticeable case is the “Campaign for Truth about the Confucius Institute,” which was initiated in 2020. Those who organized the campaign argued that the CIs suppress independent and

objective research, engage in propaganda activities for the Chinese communist regime, attempt to shape public opinion in ways favorable to China, and cultivate pro-China forces by banning open discussions on such sensitive topics as Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and the Tiananmen incident. They have organized public hearings at the National Assembly with the sponsorship of conservative parliamentarians, and submitted petitions to the Office of the President and the National Assembly to close the CIs (Kang 2021). Such moves dealt a critical blow to China's public diplomacy efforts and deterred grassroots participation in CI-related activities.

Another development is the creation of an "anti-China" community in cyberspace that shares information/disinformation on China and organizes public protests (Jeon 2025). When Chinese netizens claimed *kimchi* (Korean traditional fermented cabbage) and the *hanbok* (Korean costume) are of Chinese origin during the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, the platform mobilized citizens to protest against China's "Culture Project" (文化工程) and to initiate a petition to the Office of the President to correct China's cultural distortion (Park 2021). The anti-China civic forces were also instrumental in organizing a large demonstration in front of the Chinese embassy in Seoul to protest China's distortion of Korean history when a Korean Chinese lady in Korean costume appeared at the opening ceremony parade of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. While the Chinese government framed the scene to show China's rich cultural diversity, South Korean conservatives argued that these episodes, along with online claims about *kimchi* and the *hanbok*, reveal Beijing's coordinated efforts to recast Korean history and heritage as a subset of a greater Chinese history and culture. Such sentiments were caused partly by China's earlier state-backed historical research "Northeast Project" (東北工程) that attempted to reinterpret the history of the Korean Goguryeo Dynasty as part of the Chinese peripheral history (Kim 2022). Koreans regarded such moves as a violation of their historical sovereignty. Against this backdrop, the alleged transgression is seen as an attempt to insinuate cultural ownership rather than the mere inclusion of a minority Korean culture. Such activities by civic groups have emerged as a critical deterrent to China's efforts at public diplomacy, while placing heavy pressure on political and social leaders.

Anti-China civic forces have also been very effective in staging counter-cognitive warfare against China. The constitutional court

handling the impeachment case ruled that there were no irregularities in election process and that the Chinese were not involved in such activities (Kim and Ko 2025; Park 2025). But the fake news spread quickly and widely through conservative YouTube and social networking services. China became a scapegoat in the domestic political struggle. It would be very hard for China to engage in effective influencing activities in this social milieu. It is interesting to note that the Chinese embassy in Seoul has been urging Chinese residents in South Korea, including students, not to meddle with South Korea's domestic politics by sending messages to them regularly.

Hostile Media Environment

The media environment in South Korea is also not favorable to China. Mainstream media organizations in South Korea have been critical of China for a variety of reasons: the character of its political regime, its aggressive foreign policy, and its violation of human rights and lack of democratic governance. Even the liberal media have been shy of featuring articles favorable to China. South Korean experts on China once complained to one of us about the attitude of South Korean media, especially focusing on its correspondents in Beijing (as suggested by an informal roundtable that was held at the Institute of Asia-Pacific and Global Strategy, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences on July 1, 2025). South Korean media people are obsessed with sensationalism, and they are good at reporting about the negative sides of China–ROK relations. They rarely cover the positive sides, while amplifying the negative aspects. It is unfortunate for China that South Korean correspondents who served in Beijing tend to become staunch anti-China opinion leaders after they return to Seoul, fostering distorted mutual images. Finally, Korean journalists rely too much on Western media.

Some of these issues are debatable, but the influence of Western media on South Korea's reporting on China cannot be downplayed. Since the diplomatic normalization, South Koreans did not regard China as a threat. But as Western media, think tanks in Washington, and US policymakers have sensationalized the "China threat," this thesis has emerged as the dominant framework for the mass media in South Korea. For instance, Voice of America used to run a program, *Washington Talk*, in the Korean language that introduced a broad range of China's overseas influencing strategies. Such a program was

effective in alerting South Korea's media about China's penetration and covert options for influence buying (Ham 2025). South Korean media also rely heavily on major Western media such as the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Economist*, Reuters, and Associated Press since its correspondents in Beijing have limited access to Chinese sources.

In this environment, narratives such as the “China threat,” Xi Jinping's autocratic leadership, a potential invasion of Taiwan, the “China dream” of global hegemony, and China's economic stagnation often stem from Western sources and are echoed uncritically in South Korean reporting. The effectiveness of China's influence is therefore shaped not only by Beijing's efforts but also by counterinfluence from rivals – especially the United States – which frames public discourses in ways that undermine Chinese narratives. This effect is reinforced by the Western education of many South Korean journalists, scholars, officials, and elites, making them more receptive to US framings than to China's. This trend shows that China is structurally at a disadvantage in its soft power.

Anti-China Transnational Coalition and US Influence

American influence has also been a major barrier to China's maneuvering in South Korea. The US has been influencing South Korea in two distinct ways. One is the formation of a transnational anti-China coalition of conservatives in both countries, and the other is the direct influencing of US opinion leaders through the dissemination of messages and information.

The transnational conservative coalition was pronounced during the period of Yoon's impeachment. Annie Chan, a rich Korean American who married a Chinese American in Hawaii, formed the Korea Conservative Political Action Conference in 2023, which served as the critical link between pro-Yoon conservatives in Seoul and the US Conservative Political Action Conference (Mun 2025). Their common ground is the anti-China stance. They claim that China is behind the election irregularities and Yoon's impeachment and that China attempts to take over South Korea by supporting and co-opting progressive South Korean political forces such as the Democratic Party of Korea. They argue that conservatives in the US and South Korea should work together to prevent China's takeover of the ROK (Lee 2025).

Gordon Chang, Moss Tan, and other leading China critics in the US have been patronizing the coalition. The anti-China stance has become a common cause that binds extreme-right conservatives in South Korea and the US.

Signals coming from the US have further strengthened the domestic political foundation of these conservative groups. Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation warned about China's influence operations in South Korea and argued that China has been manipulating debates on foreign and public policy, and it seeks to spread disinformation and intensify political differences inside South Korea. The US should provide support to South Korea to fight against Chinese penetration (Klingner 2024). American officials and researchers at think tanks have kept sending South Koreans messages and information/disinformation on China. One example is the 2022 US House Foreign Affairs Committee report *China Regional Snapshot: Exposing the CCP's Global Malign Influence*. It detailed China's influence strategies and provided anti-China conservatives with material to oppose Beijing's approach. Fox News even reported that "South Korea's presidential ouster is part of Chinese strategy to 'expand its regional influence'" (Bailey 2025). These kinds of reports and media statements, mostly based on fake news, sent false hope to conservatives in South Korea that the second Trump administration is behind them.

Boomerang of China's Coercive Diplomacy

China's coercive diplomacy has also entailed immense boomerang effects, hindering the operation of its influencing strategies. A 2023 East Asia Institute survey reveals interesting findings in this regard. This survey asked its respondents (sample size: 1,006) about why they have negative perceptions of China. China's coercive behavior during the THAAD dispute was the top factor (59 percent), followed by China's disrespect of Korean identity and history (47.6 percent), Chinese diplomats' improper behavior (29.1 percent), disputes over history issues (28.6 percent), and the Communist Party's dominance (27 percent). Military threat was the least important factor (8.7 percent) (Jeong 2024). Public opinion can change over time, depending on contextual variations in bilateral relations between Beijing and Seoul. But factors such as THAAD-related coercive behavior, disrespect of Korean identity and history, and Chinese diplomats' improper

behavior could have been easily avoided through more prudent diplomatic approaches.

Beijing's Wolf Warrior diplomacy is another source of controversy. Xing Haiming, then China's ambassador to Seoul, invited Lee Jae Myung, then president of the opposition Democratic Party of Korea, to his residence for dinner on June 8, 2023. In a short speech in front of South Korean journalists before the dinner, he warned Seoul against jumping on the bandwagon of US schemes against China by saying that "We want South Korea to be free from outside factors in handling its relations with China," and "In a situation where the US is pressuring China with all its might, some are betting that the US will win and China will lose." "What can be affirmed is that those who now bet on China's defeat will surely regret it later." His statement instantly backfired as South Korean media made critical reports about these remarks (Lee and Chung 2023).

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that China's influencing maneuvers in South Korea have been more fictional than real. China has not been successful in altering South Korea's policy stance and improving its public image through direct and indirect influencing strategies.

Seoul was firmly aligned with the US during the Cold War, and it continues to favor Washington in the latter's competition with China. But it has come a long way since then in adopting a more neutral stance, and it has hedged on some issues. In this context, there has been a "win" for Beijing, even though it has not dislodged US influence from Seoul. And it has deterred a situation from deteriorating whereby its core interests about Taiwan, South China Sea, THAAD, etcetera could have been more seriously compromised. This reveals that China's direct and indirect influencing, along with formal diplomatic maneuver, has worked to some extent.

Nevertheless, our analysis of recent developments shows that China could not prevent South Korea from tilting toward the US in the geopolitical domain. Defying Beijing's strong objections, Seoul followed Washington's lead in decoupling and de-risking by friendshoring its trade and investment in the US. Beijing's promotion of public diplomacy to improve China's public image by winning the hearts and minds of South Koreans did not work out well, as evidenced

by deteriorating public opinion polls. The thesis that “The Chinese are coming” and “China is devouring South Korea” seems overly exaggerated.

We can draw several comparative implications from the analysis of China’s influencing maneuvers in South Korea. First, external counter-influence matters. The persistence of ideas such as the China threat and Thucydides’s trap, despite limited empirical support, demonstrates the decisive role of US soft power in constructing South Korea’s dominant narratives that constrain China’s maneuvering space. This Gramscian hegemony of ideas works in a subtle way. The formation of the anti-China transnational coalition between South Korea and the US poses another major challenge to China’s influencing maneuvers.

Second, domestic politics is the main driver of Seoul’s foreign policy. After each election, a new administration launches its new policies, which tend to alternate and veer sharply away from the previous government with remarkable ease. China has been a victim of such electoral cycles and partisan competition. Worse is the confluence of the growing political strength of anti-China conservative forces armed with Cold War ideology, the proliferation of anti-China civic forces and their combative resistance, and a hostile media environment influenced by Western media. Such a domestic political environment serves as a major hindrance to Beijing’s influencing efforts in South Korea.

Third, public opinion tends to follow and reflect the outlook and policies of the incumbent president. But it is undeniable that the public image of China has rapidly deteriorated since the THAAD fiasco in 2016. China’s direct and indirect influencing maneuvers notwithstanding, there was no reversal of this trend. Since the advent of Trump 2.0, a slight change in favor of China can be detected, but not a significant one. Public opinion is not fixed, but volatile and changeable, and there is a chance for improvement in South Koreans’ attitudes toward China. But Beijing’s current influencing efforts alone may not be sufficient to alter public opinion in South Korea.

Finally, diplomats are not agents of direct or indirect influencing maneuvers. However, their behavior can have a profound impact on influence attempts. Patterns of coercive diplomacy, as shown during the THAAD dispute, as well as assertive behavior by Chinese diplomats, can produce serious adverse boomerang effects that can easily damage China’s direct and indirect influence operations.

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